



TURKEY:

CITY DWELLERS TRANSFORM MUNICIPAL GOVERNANCE

In a Nutshell

Turkey has developed an innovative way for fostering interaction and dialogue among community members and municipal authorities in local decision-making. Across a number of cities, through a combination of locally driven initiatives and national level support, consultative mechanisms have sprung up to engage an array of local actors.

In many cases, this has changed the landscape of municipal governance. And while securing the approval of the central government has been crucial, the wider Local Agenda 21 initiative, as well as international events such as the 1996 Habitat II conference, boosted the confidence of local actors enough so they were willing to try a new approach.

The Story

The seeds of participation at the municipal level were sown in Turkey in 1996, during the United Nations Second International Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), held in Istanbul. It marked the first major international event where civil society organizations claimed equal participation in local decision-making. Inspired by this message, a number of Turkish NGOs started organizations at the neighbourhood level, only to see them languish from lack of structure and focus. Capacity 21's Local Agenda 21 programme stepped in to provide guidance as well as technical and financial support.

Today, 50 Turkish municipalities have active Local Agenda 21 initiatives, with city councils that usually meet quarterly and are drawn from a wide spectrum of local partners. They include ex-officio members such as the governor, mayor and parliamentarians of the province, as well as representatives of foundations, professional associations, private sector organizations, trade unions, academic institutions and neighbourhood groups.

In more than half the participating cities, the majority of the members of the councils and Local Agenda 21 secretariats are women. Under them, working groups prepare city action plans to address local problems, ranging from solid waste management and the environmental protection of a mountain or river basin, to education and child care. More and more municipal authorities are including the recommendations of the working groups on the municipal agenda, and even formally adopting them.

In Ankara, for example, the City Council persuaded the municipal government to clean up two polluted lakes, while in Izmit, the council and the municipality are collaborating on an action plan entitled "Rehabilitation-Reconstruction After the (1999)

Earthquake”. In Antalya, the council established a permanent residence for street children, refurbished and operated entirely through donations from local stakeholders.

A distinct advantage of the system is that it is not associated with any political party. This makes people more willing to provide ideas and work towards consensus. In the past, participatory platforms often failed because they were associated with one party, and adherents of other groups withdrew. Now, most people can find a place for themselves.

Traditionally, governance in Turkish cities has rested securely in the hands of mayors who had little connection with the local population. But with today’s multi-party democracy, mayors can be elected with only 25 per cent of the vote. This means that even those who are sceptical about participation recognize that it can strengthen their base of support. In some cities, Local Agenda 21 activities created such high expectations that when change did not come quickly, the mayor was voted out of office.

All of this activity, however, would not have been possible without the approval of the central government. Initially, it was difficult to establish participatory mechanisms because the governorates – who are provincial authorities representing central ministries, with jurisdiction over the municipalities – challenged them. After a series of appeals, the Ministry of Interior issued the 1998 Local Agenda 21 Law, urging all of Turkey’s governorates to become partners in Local Agenda 21. Not only was the problem of the “legality” of participatory platforms overcome, but the active involvement of public agencies in the Local Agenda 21 process was secured.

Results and Critical Factors

- Through a combination of locally driven initiatives and external ideas, municipal governance has opened to the participation of local stakeholders, who work in partnership with authorities. By mobilizing the capabilities of the general population, municipalities increase their own capacities.
- Securing central government approval bolstered ownership, while the Local Agenda 21 Law ensured the engagement of public agencies. Technical know-how, financial resources and lessons learned from the wider Local Agenda 21 programme, and international events such as Habitat II, played a catalytic role in supporting local actors as they tried out a new approach.
- Participation has spread across the country, as those who were initially less convinced have seen what can be achieved through joint decision-making and local partnership. Once the political pay-off of participatory approaches is recognized, local politicians tend to be quick to champion the process – at the same time, a key to success is ensuring that local City Councils remain non-partisan.

Further information

Capacity 21 Country Study: Approaches to Sustainability. Local Agenda 21 in Turkey: Moving from Local to National. 2000 (www.undp.org/capacity21/docs/ats/ats-turkey-en.pdf).

Capacity 21 Evaluation Report 1993-2001. 2002
(www.undp.org/capacity21/docs/cap21GlobalEval2002.pdf).

Turkey's Local Agenda 21 (<http://yerelgundem21.org>).

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